

Grassfed to Finish by Allan Nation

Book Summary and Review

Summary

Chapter 1: The “F” Word

In order to produce a product that is sold to the end consumer, we must shift our low cost, low input mindset back to the mindset of being a farmer. It is critical to be able to produce year round, consistent, high quality, grass-fed beef.

Chapter 2: First, Some Background and History

This chapter gives a history of farming and raising cattle in the United States. In the past, corn was heavy and difficult to transport relative to its value. Cattle were a way to convert corn into a product that could be transported and was more valuable. Because of how spread out America was compared to Europe, there was little focus on the relationship between farmer and consumer. Product quality did not matter much to farmers, but there was a focus on cutting costs instead. Because feedlots finished most beef, desired genetics were cattle that took longer to mature, and were more difficult to fatten on grass.

Chapter 3: Three Distinct Phases

The three phases of beef production are cow-calf, stocker and finishing. Each phase has different requirements in what the cattle need to consume.

A cow can do well on low quality pasture, if she can get fat prior to calving. You must set your calving data appropriately in order to achieve this.

Stocker cattle need “highly digestible grass” in order to have high rates of gain. If you don’t have “highly digestible” winter annuals, it’s a good idea to not wean until after winter in the spring. The cow will still be able to recover if the calving data is not too early. Stocker cattle are not putting on much fat, but are growing muscle and frame. Because of this, they do better with a higher protein diet.

Finishing cattle need to put on fat. In order to put on fat effectively you must have high energy forage. High protein forage will not work well for finishing cattle. A balance of protein and carbohydrate is optimal for finishing. Finishing on perennial pastures in the fall does not work well because in the fall, energy begins to move to the plant’s roots, which changes the balance of the plants to higher protein. This process is reverse in the spring and makes spring and early summer finishing easy. Allan Nation recommends two options for finishing in the fall: Don’t try to finish in October and November, but

rather on spring pasture the next year or on “frost-hardened winter annuals in December”. Alternatively you can finish on a “late-planted, direct-grazed, greenleaf corn.” This is a big change in mindset as most people are used to harvesting in the fall.

Chapter 4: Theory of Finishing

This chapter is packed with valuable information on how to properly finish cattle. Here are some of the highlights. Your cows should weigh around 1000 pounds. This needs to be achieved through the right genetics. Conventional genetics are designed for grain feeding and are designed to prevent the animal from getting too fat. When grass finishing we need genetics that fatten easily. The main concern with grass is getting the animal fat enough.

In order to put on fat, your cattle must have a high carbohydrate, high sugar pasture. This is different than the requirements of stocker which do great on a higher protein lower carbohydrate diet.

Most of the energy an animal takes in goes to maintaining body weight. Your animals must gain more than 1.7 pounds each day for 60 to 90 days before butchering.

Finishing in the fall on perennials is very difficult, as the pastures begin to shift to a higher protein ratio. Carbohydrates begin to move from the above ground to the root systems of the plants.

One way to help with gains in the spring and fall is to supplement with free choice alfalfa hay to increase dry matter. You can even offer this year round.

The only time of year you can naturally produce high quality, grass-finished beef with good marbling on perennial grasses is late spring to mid-summer. Once finished if your animals continue to gain you can extend your harvest later into the summer.

Proper finishing of animals starts as soon as the calf is born. The calf must have plenty of milk in its first 2 weeks. Moving your calving season to June 21 (or 4-6 weeks earlier in mid latitudes) can help with this as your cows will be fattened before calving. This will allow your stockers to gain well at the critical time of 65 to 70% of full grown. This will align with your good spring grasses at one year of age. The fat cells are formed at this phase of life.

One way to start with finishing beef is to add 100 pounds to the weight of your cows to get your finished weight of your steers. You can divide this weight by 1.4 (a rough average daily gain through the year). This will give you the number of days till slaughter. Keep in mind that if your target finishing weight is more than 1200 pounds (your cows are 1100 or more) then you should move to smaller genetics.

Don't try to wean your animals early. If you wean early it will dramatically slow their gains.

If you are buying animals, make sure they are already in good condition. If they are skinny, they will not finish well. You should not allow your cattle to go backwards on weight gain or the meat will become less tender.

For the tenderest meat, make sure to castrate before 7 months.

The best place to start for beginners is finishing heifers in late spring.

Chapter 5: Horses for Courses – Using the Right Genetics

The most important trait to select for is fertility. Selecting for this trait also creates a herd that is lower maintenance. An added benefit of selecting for fertility in a grass program is that your animals will be suited to finish easily on grass. Selecting for fertility also increases the amount of high value cuts you get from your animals.

Fertility in cows and bulls is expressed in a big butt. Fertile bulls will also have broad shoulders. Crossbreeding can be a big problem in a grass finishing system due to the inconsistencies produced.

Don't buy breeding animals that are not from your same climate or latitude. If you do the genetics will not be suited for the nutrient density of your area.

Smaller animals do better in hot and humid areas. Thick hides are important to increase the ability of the animal to stay cool through blood flow. You want animals that lose their winter coat quickly in the spring. Also consider the color and sheen of your cattle. Glossy and lighter colored cattle reflect significantly more heat and can stay cooler in the summer.

Chapter 6: Myths and Truths About Grass-Finished Beef

Despite all the myths about grass finished beef a study by new Zealanders found that if you compare grassfed and grainfed at the same size rather than at the same age, the meat is almost the same. The only two noticeable differences were the color of fat and the color of the meat.

What does differ, is the nutrition quality in grassfed meat: 500% more CLA, 400% more Vitamin A, 300% more Vitamin E, 75% more Omega-3, 78% more Beta-Carotene. These compounds have been show to improve health. CLA or Conjugated Linoleic Acid in particular shows significant benefits in promoting health and preventing disease. As people start to realize the importance of healthy eating, demand for grass fed products should continue to increase.

Chapter 7: Three Proven Prototypes

In this chapter, Allan outlines 3 different production models that work well for producing grass finished beef. You should pick or adapt the one that makes most sense for your situation

The first model is the Argentina model. In this model, cattle are finished year round. Cattle that are finishing must not be overstocked. Most herds in this model use a leader-follower system where the finishing animals graze first followed by the other animals. This allows the finishing animals to get the highest quality forage. In order to finish cattle year round, winter annuals are planted. Each type is planted separately as they all have a different peak time to be grazing them. Making high quality hay always available is a good idea to make sure the cattle are always gaining well.

In New Zealand, beef is not usually finished year round. Due to the low cost, most of the beef is harvested during summer at around 24 to 30 months of age. Harvesting at this time of year helps to match grazing to the grass growth. Care is taken to not overstock with finishing cattle. This provides more efficient gains as a certain amount of feed goes to body maintenance. Cattle are prevented from losing weight in the winter so that the beef is tender. It is recommended to have a good amount of sodium in your soils. Higher sodium soils help prevent bloat, and make a great tasting product.

Northern Ireland has another model. During winter, cattle are fed away from the pasture due to the wet conditions. Grass silage is made during peak grass season and stored to feed during winter. Silage can also allow animals to be harvested during winter. It is important to cut silage at the time when it would be best for animals to graze. Afternoon is usually a good time cutting as carbohydrate content is higher. Due to the wet weather care must be taken to protect pastures. Short grazing periods can be used and then move animals off pasture. You can remove cattle from pasture when it is raining. You should also always use a back fence as this protects your pastures from compaction. Pugged areas should be planted as soon as possible.

Chapter 8: Start with Heifers

Heifers are easier to finish than steers so they may be a good option to start with. If you do not want to use annual forage and don't want to go through a second winter with your animals, then heifers are a good choice. A heifer can finish out at a 70 to 80 percent lower weight than steers of the same breed. Heavier weaning weights can help you make sure you reach finishing weight in time. If you add winter annuals for grazing this can improve even more your ability to quickly finish heifers.

Chapter 9: The Forage Chain

In order to finish beef year round, you can create a forage chain. This forage chain ensures that finishing animals always have forage to finish on no matter what time of year it is.

Before planting annual crops in your forage chain, you must have enough nitrogen in the ground. If nitrogen is too low, you can plant perennial pasture with a lot of legumes. The best legumes to plant are white clover and alfalfa.

Care must be taken when grazing alfalfa to prevent bloat. When alfalfa is dark green, bloat is less likely than when it is light green. Younger animals usually have more of a problem with bloat than older animals.

The book goes into detail on annual species that can be planted to allow you to finish in summer, fall, and winter. With perennial cool season pastures that are high in legumes, you can only finish March, April, May, and June. You can use annuals to finish in the other parts of the year.

Suggested winter annuals for finishing are annual ryegrass, oats, wheat, cereal rye and triticale. These annuals need to be grazed prior to setting seed or you will no longer have grass-finished beef.

Suggested summer annuals for finishing are soybeans, green leaf corn, crabgrass, and eastern gamma grass (actually a warm-season perennial).

Feeding hay or silage in the summer can be very helpful to increasing gains when finishing cattle. The hay or silage should be leguminous and cut from the prime growing season (spring to early summer). Alfalfa hay is one of the best choices. In the summer, feeding leguminous silage is better than hay as it has higher moisture content during the dry summer season.

Chapter 10: Laying the Foundation in the Soil

It is important to develop a system that leads to financial success. The sequence that Michael Murphy suggests is the following.

1. Do whatever it takes to grow a quality pasture.
2. Use only animals genetically selected for pasture production.
3. Get the animals' production and reproduction in sync with the grass growth curve.
4. Cut labor costs per unit of production.
5. Moved up the value chain as rapidly as possible.
6. Reinvest profits in high return areas.

Adding clovers to your pasture improves directly your animals' performance as well as improving your soil. If you are having trouble growing legumes, you need to test for and correct mineral deficiencies. Allan Nation says that "Lasting profits always come from doing those things most people are unwilling to do."

Chapter 11: Low Stress for Tender Beef

Low stress is one of the most critical factors in tender, good tasting beef. According to Temple Grandin, rough handling and genetics are the main cause of animals that become stressed quickly. To make future experiences positive and not stressful it is important that an animal's first experience is a good one.

According to Ann Wells a veterinarian, "Disease is primarily caused by stress," Shipping cattle can be a large source of stress as well as wormers, and antibiotics.

If your cattle are not used to being in groups in small areas, it is a good idea to periodically put them in a pen together. This will get them used to closer confinement which will prepare them for loading and butchering. One reason grain fed cattle don't usually have a "gamey" flavor is that they are used to the confined and loud environment. Being in this environment at the abattoir is not a stressor for them.

Chapter 12: Turning Cull Cows Into Gourmet Products

Older animals tend to have much better flavor than younger animals. If you finish your cull cows properly they can produce excellent beef. The texture of the beef will be coarser than older animals. Keep in mind that grinding tough beef will not make it less tough. You still need to finish an animal properly in order to have high quality ground beef.

Chapter 13: Abattoirs

In order to make smaller abattoirs profitable, they must have animals to process year round. Learning to finish animals year round can help keep your small local abattoirs in business. You may even be able to negotiate significant discounts for guaranteed business year round.

The reason that restaurants do not want to buy frozen beef is that the cell walls are ruptured by freezing and blood runs out on the plate after cooking.

Some factors that affect tenderness are genetics, age of animal, stress, aging and how quickly the carcass is chilled.

The main reason leaner carcasses are tougher in the United States, is how quickly they are chilled after butchering. The chilling is set for the fattest carcasses as the layer of fat slows down the chilling of the meat. If the chilling of the carcasses is slowed down in the first 2 hours after harvest, meat will be tenderer. This is why it is so important to have a good fat layer on the carcass. You can't control the temperature your butcher uses to chill the carcass, but you can prevent it from chilling too quickly by having a good fat layer.

Identifying tough carcasses can be done with expensive Ultra-sound technology or by carefully cooking a ribeye and tasting it.

It seems the best range of days to age grass fed beef is 14-21 days.

Chapter 14: Pioneering a New Industry

This chapter explores the opportunities and challenges of pioneering a new industry. It helps us understand that as grass-finished beef farmers, the challenges we face are normal to any new industry and should be embraced rather than avoided. There is a U shaped curve to those who enter a pioneer industry. Things get harder before they get easier. This is sometimes called the learning curve. If you can stick with it and get through the bottom of the U, the payoff can be great. This process can take many years so it is important to count the cost.

Allan Nation says “the pain you are feeling is normal and that it will eventually pass if you persevere and keep trying new things.”

A value chain is comprised of other businesses that are necessary to get your product to the consumer. Pioneer industries often have incomplete value chains, making it difficult to get your product to market. You will have to work at building this value chain.

The other challenge in planning your business is that the business environment is always changing. You must change your plan as the environment changes and in anticipation of coming changes.

There are only two basic competitive advantages in business: cost and differentiation. As a small business in a pioneer industry, competing on cost is extremely difficult. It is better to focus on differentiation and how your product is different than other products.

In order to be successful in business your business must be good at production, marketing and finance. If any of these is lacking, your business will fail. We are usually not naturally great at all three of these skills. It's important to learn and become good at these skills and hire people who can help us. Most farmers feel more comfortable with production. Finance can be outsourced better than marketing. Allan Nation says “There are a lot more instances of successful businesses farming out production than there are of successful businesses farming out marketing.”

So what is the key to marketing? Seth Godin says that “getting noticed is the heart of all marketing.” Many people are not comfortable with doing what it takes to get noticed. In order to be successful you must learn to get noticed. It all starts with a product that is very different.

Chapter 15: Ready? Set? Go for It!

The market for grassfed meats is expanding rapidly as consumers learn about the benefits. Allan Nation says “The key is to keep focused on the eating quality of the product as the consumer defines quality – tenderness and taste.” He says, “New industries create new wealth for new people. I hope you will decide to be one of them. Go for it!”

Review

Grassfed to finish is the best book I have read so far on finishing grass fed beef. It is very practical and explains the important factors in creating grass finished beef that is tender, tasty and healthy.

I also like that the book explains techniques to produce finished grass-fed beef year round. This will be an important skill for farmers as abattoirs require year round supply to stay profitable. Explaining several models that other countries use to produce grass fed beef was helpful as well.

I felt that Allan’s explanation of the challenges and opportunities in this industry were realistic but encouraging.

There is so much practical knowledge in this book and general wisdom. This book exceeded my expectations.

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About Josiah Garber (creator of this book summary)

Josiah first became interested in nutrition for health and healing. He started farming to produce the healthiest food for his family and now for everyone! Follow his journey at www.thefarmingpodcast.com or visit his farm website at www.fireflymeadowsfarm.com

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